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The Legacy of Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis

by WALTER TERRY

Cover designed by Karl Leabo

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Many of the items used here are from valuable gifts recently made to the Library. Of the Duncan illustrations, the pictures on pages 4, 7, 12, 27, 32 and 49 are from the Irma Duncan Collection. The portrait on page 9 is from the Allan Ross Macdougall Collection, and the full figure photograph on that page is the gift of Mary Fanton Roberts. All photographs of Ruth St. Denis and her company, unless otherwise credited, are from the Denishawn Collection given to the Library by Miss St. Denis and Ted Shawn. The pictures on pages 39 and 40 are from the Humphrey-Weidman Collection.

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On the cover: A portrait of Ruth St. Denis taken by an unidentified photographer in Germany, 1906-7. On the front, an original drawing of Isadora Duncan by Jules Grandjouan. On the back, a drawing from Grandjouan's *Isadora Duncan,* Paris, 1912.

On the title page: Isadora Duncan, photographed about 1908 by Haensel and Jones, and Ruth St. Denis in *The Incense,* photographed 1906-8 by Paul Meyer.

All these pictures are from the Dance Collection of The New York Public Library.

DANCE PERSPECTIVES
A. J. PISCHL, SELMA JEANNE COHEN, Editors
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IN PERSPECTIVE

America is justly proud of its dance innovators. They have earned us world esteem as leaders in a great creative art. Yet pride may well be tinged with humility when we recall how recently and with what attendant struggles this position was achieved.

At the turn of the century, the United States still looked to Europe for styles and standards in art. It took great conviction and courage then for two young women to proclaim that they, Americans, had discovered new and valid forms of dance. Both sought recognition in their native land—and found it abroad. Eventually, with long overdue eagerness, their own country acknowledged them. And it has since, even complacently, reaped the benefits of their pioneering efforts.

America now honors Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. But the precise nature of our debt to them is too often too glibly dismissed with a vague reference to "liberation from out-worn conventions." Negatives cannot explain their accomplishments. They wanted freedom from conventions in order to pursue very positive ideals. And it is from their specific realizations of those ideals that the American dance has developed.

Walter Terry, Dance Critic of the *New York Herald Tribune,* here undertakes to determine the true extent of the contributions of these pioneers that we may, in the future, pay them more enlightened homage.

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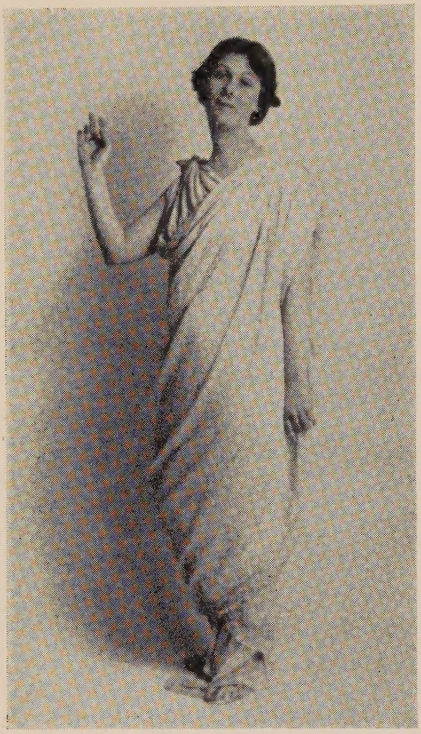

Left: Isadora Duncan, 1912. Photograph by Otto, Paris. Below: Ruth St. Denis, with two unidentified dancers, in *Egypta,* 1910. Photograph by Sarony, New York. (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

INTRODUCTION

There is hardly one of us who has not, at one time or another, looked into the past, either genealogically or in terms of a cultural heritage, to discover personal antecedents. In a family line of descent, there is perhaps, a duke or a great artist or some colorful figure (the horse thief and the do-nothing ancestor are carefully overlooked). In a different, but related, way, we may inspect our heritage as a people, looking with pride at those who went before us as seekers of freedom, as daring pioneers, as discoverers or builders. We make this investigation not only to satisfy our curiosity and, possibly, our pride, but also to celebrate the achievements of those who plotted the course we now follow.

In American dance, it is quite clear to most of us that we descend from either Isadora Duncan or Ruth St. Denis or, perhaps, both. Is it possible to determine which one was the stronger influence? Were the two, and are they still, rivals? or do they complement each other?

In the early days of our republic, we had two great men, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. They were antagonists in their era yet today, Hamiltonian nationalism and Jeffersonian democracy are united in the pattern of government. The passage of more than one hundred and fifty years has given us a perspective on Hamilton and Jefferson with respect to American government but with American art and, in this instance, the art of America's dance, the lenses of time may not yet be fully in focus.

Nonetheless, the vigor, the forms, the ingredients of American dance demand that we look at the sources while the immediate links with those sources are still available for investigation, while the elements of transition are discernible in living performers and choreographies. It is possible that we may find one—Duncan or St. Denis—has a stronger case than the other for the right to be called the mother of American dance.

At almost every turn, one comes across surprising and informative testaments of a line of dance descent. One day, a few years ago, I took the great Russian-American ballerina, Alexandra Danilova, to

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watch a class taught by Hanya Holm. Somewhere along the line, I heard Mme. Danilova murmur, "Ah, just like Isadora." On another occasion, I was standing at the back of a small studio-theatre where Miss St. Denis was appearing in a lecture-recital. A group of youthful students from the Martha Graham School were seated in front of me. Again, somewhere along the line, I heard a voice say in hushed tones of surprise, "Why, that's where Martha's movements come from."

Two separate remarks by Miss Graham herself caused me to wonder even more. One time, she said, "Miss Ruth used to have blue curtains over her dressing room door. I could marvel at her dancing on stage but what really excited me was the goddess who disappeared behind those curtains. What was the mystery of her genius?" On the second occasion, some years later, Miss Graham said, "I felt the presence of Isadora in my dressing room tonight."

Who was the stronger influence?

Although Miss St. Denis has outlived Isadora Duncan by more than three decades, the two women were contemporaries when each, separately, rebelled against the dance standards of their day, formulated new concepts of the art, experimented, created, developed. Both came of well educated but poor American families of Irish stock; Duncan from the West, St. Denis from the East. Both had gifted, devoted, resourceful mothers and charming, but not always very helpful, fathers.

Both were precocious children. Each displayed strong dance inclinations in babyhood and, although all normal children instinctively dance, little Isadora and little Ruthie Dennis, separated by a continent, wanted to dance more than they wished to do anything else. Each was also precocious intellectually. Isadora writes that at twelve, she was reading *Adam Bede* and stating her belief in free love. And Miss St. Denis writes that at twelve, she was sitting in a tree at the family's New Jersey farm reading *Camille* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason.*

As child dancers, each was almost entirely self-taught. Duncan reports that she had three ballet lessons and rebelled against the technique. St. Denis, who studied briefly with Marie Bonfanti (the star of *The Black Crook* extravaganza of 1866), notes that she learned "three of the possible five positions of the feet and got thrown out of class." Both, however, came under the influence of the teach-

Left: Ruth St. Denis as the courtesan in *O-Mika*, 1913. Photograph by White, New York. Right: Isadora Duncan, 1909 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

ings of François Delsarte, the French scientist of movement expressiveness. Basically, each found her own way of dance through her individual genius, inspired perhaps, in some degree, by Delsarte, by literature, by art of all kinds. But a profound exploration of nature—the nature which surrounds us, the nature of the universe, especially the nature of man himself—was the source, for both, of a new concept of art.

The American dance of today is obviously descended from both Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. But to whom is it more indebted? Before the evidence can be sifted and the witnesses called, let us review, briefly, the testaments of two lives, the chronologies. The careers, the accomplishments of the two are well known, so here now, are only capsule biographies to remind us of the courses of two lives devoted to dance.

Isadora Duncan. Above: c. 1903. Right: c. 1896 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

ISADORA DUNCAN

Isadora Duncan was born in San Francisco in 1878. Her mother divorced her father when Isadora was still a baby, and the dancer later recalled that although poverty pursued them and they were forced to move continuously because they failed to pay the rent, her childhood was a happy one. In fact, with a sort of proud defiance, she recorded in her autobiography, *My Life,* that she, her brothers and sister were free of governesses and nurses, free even of their busy mother's watchful eye and that the very freedom they experienced made possible her evolution of a free dance.

With her freedom, she was able to run to the sea when she chose to do so and she has stated that her first ideas of movement and of dance came from the rhythms of the waves. This instinctive response to nature in terms of movement was coupled with an early exposure to fine music. Evenings, Mrs. Duncan would play the piano for her children, recite poetry for them, read and discuss philosophies. This, for Isadora, was education. She detested school.

When she was only six, Isadora was already teaching her incipient principles of a new dance to others. Mrs. Duncan, one day, discovered her daughter, surrounded by babies whom she was instructing in how to wave their arms. Thus was the first Duncan school of dance launched and so successful did it become that neighborhood parents paid the tiny instructor to teach their children. When Isadora was ten, her little school had grown to such proportions that a studio was sought and sister Elizabeth was shortly added to the faculty.

In addition to teaching her "system" in the homes of San Francisco's wealthy, Isadora pursued a creative course. With her mother as accompanist, she started to make dances. When she was twelve, she danced in the barn theater which her brother Augustin had established on the grounds of the big house which their father had given to them during one of the rare periods when he had money. Shortly thereafter, the whole family toured the area with programs of dance, music, recitations and dramas.

Turned down at an audition held by a traveling troupe in San Francisco, Isadora made up her mind to leave her home city and

find her fortune elsewhere. With her mother, her little tunic and very little money, she set out for Chicago. There, under an assumed name (she wasn't at all pleased with the type of dancing required by the management), she performed for one week at a roof garden. This was 1896 and, not long after the roof garden stint, she managed to see Augustin Daly, the producer, and win from him a promise of an audition in New York for his next show. Emboldened, she borrowed money, was joined by her sister and her brother Augustin (of course, her mother remained with her) and set out for the East, where, for two years, Isadora appeared in Daly productions in New York and on the road. But she found herself increasingly unhappy with her assignments and frustrated by her inability to convince the producer that she had really discovered a new way of dancing worthy of his support.

Centering her interest on her work in the family studio in Carnegie Hall, she continued to practice and create, and it was here that she met the young composer Ethelbert Nevin and with him prepared a series of concerts which were received with great enthusiasm. There were other performing opportunities for Isadora in the mansions and summer estates of society. But she was disillusioned with her work for Daly, with dancing for the rich, with the inability to continue and expand the recitals she and Nevin had started and with her countrymen's indifference to what she frankly referred to as her genius.

In 1899, the family (with the exception of Augustin) boarded a cattle boat under an assumed name and set out to conquer London. The London period may have been happier but it did not serve to advance Isadora's career. Once again, she danced in private homes, visited museums, read voraciously as she had always done and finally, on the urging of her brother Raymond, moved on to Paris.

Isadora, although limited in the number of concerts she could give and known only to a comparatively small circle, found in Paris the key to her career. Greek vase paintings in the Louvre inspired, a performance of *Oedipus Rex* caused her to write "thenceforth I knew my way" and it was here in Paris that she experimented with body movements and reached that point of discovery where her spiritual and technical approach to dance was clear to her. She sought for the divine expression of man's spirit and she found its bodily center in the solar plexus. She said that the soul was in the solar plexus but

Isadora Duncan, 1899. Photograph by Schloss, New York (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

she also found that here was "the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversities of movements are born." On this principle, together with her understanding and application of the dramatic and emotional forces of gravity, she built her school, her system or, more accurately, her way of dance.

In 1902, Isadora traveled around Germany with Loie Fuller, whom she admired enormously, visited Vienna and, in 1903 in Budapest, was given her first contract to dance as a solo artist in a public theatre. She was engaged for thirty performances and with the first, she established herself triumphantly as one of the great artists of all time. The remaining performances were sold out, and a tour of Hungary followed.

The rest of Isadora's fabulous career—restless and exciting, triumphant and tragic—is well known. From Hungary, she went on to successes in Austria and Germany, winning the praise and the friendship of the great artists and philosophers of the day; to Italy and, for the first time, to Greece from whose heritage she had already drawn so much. She visited Russia, performed in Central Europe with a chorus of Greek boys she had brought from Athens, established

Lisa, Anna and Irma Duncan, adopted daughters of Isadora, dancing by the sea at Long Beach, N. Y., c. 1915. Photograph by Arnold Genthe (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

(with Elizabeth) her dance school in Germany and met Gordon Craig, who was to become the father of her first two children.

With European recognition and adulation to support her, Isadora returned to America in 1908. The first New York appearances and subsequent tour were failures but near the end of the year, Isadora appeared at the Metropolitan Opera House, with Walter Damrosch and Symphony Orchestra, in an enormously successful series and went on from there to enjoy a splendid tour which included praise from the President (Theodore Roosevelt) himself.

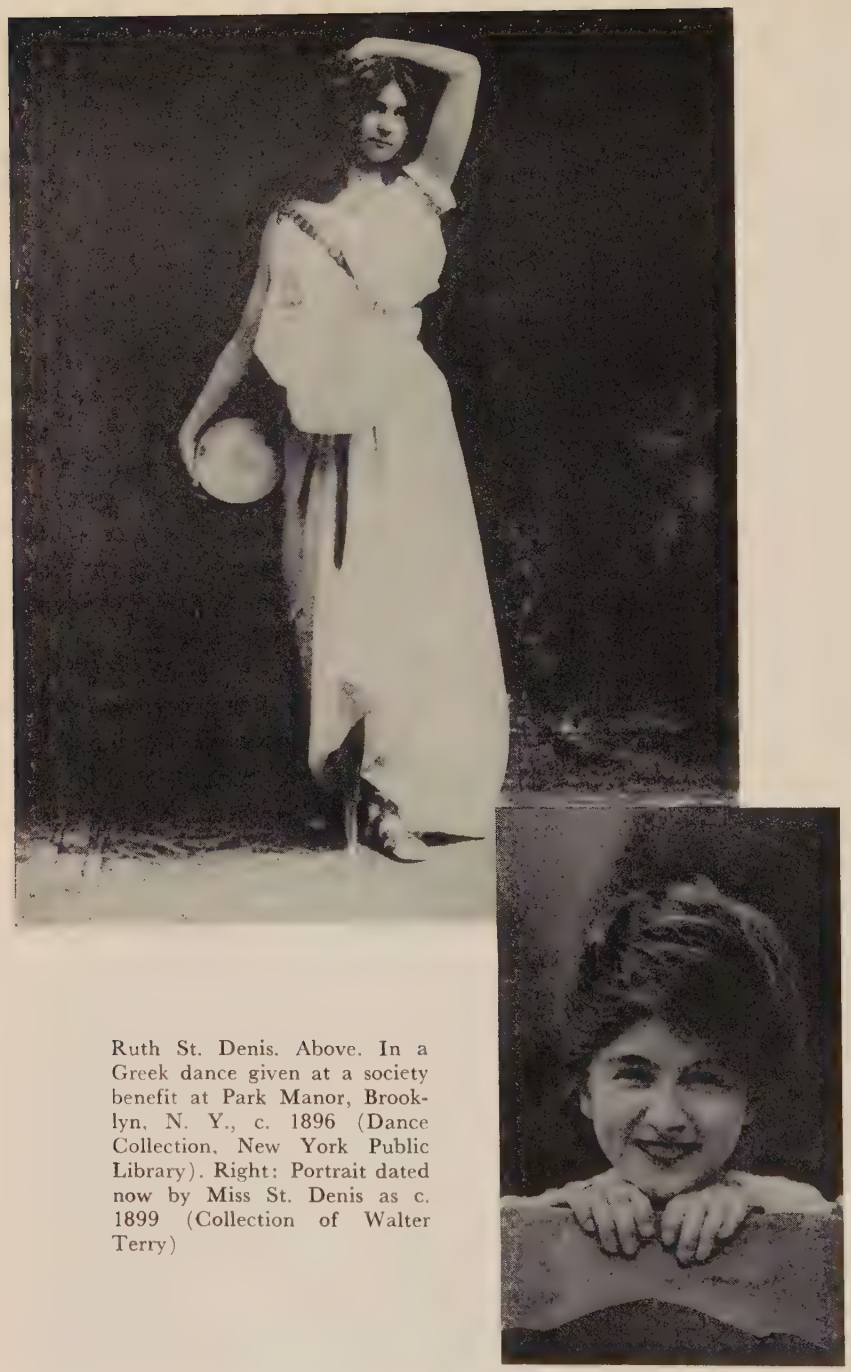
In her American performances in 1908-1909 and again in 1911 (she returned to Europe in the interim), Isadora shocked, surprised, stirred and, frequently, uplifted critics and public with her dancing to music of Chopin, Bach, Gluck, Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner. Occassionally, she danced to music originally created for dancing but more often she turned to the inspiration of non-dance music and brought upon herself a "how-dare-she" attitude from musical purists. Frequently, she was described as a "barefoot" dancer and her work was characterized as a "vogue," but the impact of a genius made itself felt even upon the grudging critics.

In the ensuing years, Isadora established a school in Paris, returned to Russia, traveled and performed in Europe and South

America and danced in her homeland again in 1915, 1916, 1917, 1922. In the late summer of 1927, two months after her last recital in Paris, she was strangled by a scarf that became caught in a wheel of the car in which she was traveling.

The years had witnessed her growth as an artist. In her later life, the tragedy of her children's death (they were drowned in 1913) found reflection in her dances. Not all was joy, not all ecstasy. Sorrow, even ugliness entered her vocabulary of action as the figure of Isadora became large, noble, almost monumental not merely in body but in spirit. The loss of her two children, another baby who died at birth, an unhappy marriage to the Russian poet Serge Essenin, disillusionment with Soviet Russia, financial problems, even the advancing years weighed heavily on her. She died a great artist whose "vogue," as some had called it, was on the wane but she left behind her adopted daughters, students, the Isadorables who would attempt to carry on her dance creed. Still more, she left behind her the vision of a free, noble, ecstatic dance, a dance which celebrated human passions but reached for the divine in spirit. She left her version of the dance of life.

Pastel drawing by Jules Grandjouan (*Isadora Duncan,* Paris, 1912)



Ruth St. Denis. Above. In a Greek dance given at a society benefit at Park Manor, Brooklyn, N. Y., c. 1896 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library). Right: Portrait dated now by Miss St. Denis as c. 1899 (Collection of Walter Terry)

RUTH ST. DENIS

Ruth St. Denis was born on a New Jersey farm in 1880 (or, possibly as early as 1876) of an inventor-father and a physician-mother. The first legend of her dancing is that at the age of three at a community barn dance, her father placed a tambourine in her hand and little Ruthie Dennis commenced to jump and jounce, beat out time and invent some rather uncertain steps.

Later, when she became a gawky girl, her mother, with some sort of a Delsarte book of exercises in front of her, led the child through a series of what were presumably health-giving and grace-inducing actions. There were also occasional lessons in social dancing and what might possibly have been some kind of "fancy dancing." But the child received most of her ideas from books—*Camille,* when she was eight or a trifle older; the New Testament at eleven; Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at twelve—and from rare experiences at the theatre. She recalls traveling to New York to see the circus and of being overwhelmed by a concluding spectacle called "The Burning of Rome." The impact was enormous, and in her autobiography (*Ruth St. Denis: An Unfinished Life*) she writes that "the spiritual descendants of 'The Burning of Rome' pervaded my whole career."

Dancing was in her body, the search for beauty was her creed but these were irrevocably related to theatre, to the dramatic, to spectacle. A career in the theatre was inescapable and somehow—she does not know exactly why—it found its form in dance. She could act and sing, but the urge to move in rhythmic form prevailed and, at sixteen, Ruthie Dennis was dancing "Gavotte d'Amour" eleven times a day at Worth's Museum in New York.

Thus began a busy career as a theatrical dancer specializing in the high kicks, splits, roll-overs and skirt dances of the day. In one show, *The Ballet Girl* (1898), she even danced on pointe despite her lack of sound ballet training. There were lulls, of course, and the restless child earned money as a model and even entered a six-day bicycle race at Madison Square Garden where she came in sixth (subsequently, she won the Pennsylvania state championship).

Sometime during the mid-1890's, she heard a song called "The Garden of Sleep," sung by a fellow student at the Packer Collegiate

Institute where she had resumed her schooling for a brief period. Something in the song reminded her of the movements she had seen performed some years before when she had attended a recital by Genevieve Stebbins, a pupil of Delsarte. She asked her friend if she might dance to the song, and a presentation was arranged. For the first time, Ruth Dennis, clad in a Greek tunic, danced barefoot. There were no tricks, no acrobatics as the young rebel moved into a new area of rhythmic poetry.

But there was to be much more show business before a new prophet of a new dance was finally to materialize. For a season the young Ruth worked for Augustin Daly and, just about the turn of the century, began an association with David Belasco (who renamed her St. Denis) which was to last for five years. There were tours as an actress-dancer in Belasco productions, including a trip to England (where she first saw Isadora dance) in 1900, but if St. Denis was not actually unhappy, she was dissatisfied. Years of study, of meditation, of longing to find a way to dance of man's spirit and the spirit of God came to a head, and the releasing agent was a cigarette poster.

In a drug store in Buffalo, N. Y., while on tour with a Belasco unit, she saw an advertisement for Egyptian Deities cigarettes, a poster featuring a seated figure of the goddess Isis. St. Denis, struck with the picture, obtained it and brooded over it, finding in it a key to her goals. She did not want simply to be an Egyptian dancer—she had seen Egyptian-style ballets long before. She wanted to be Egypt, to represent in dance the heart and the spirit of a nation.

As soon as possible, she left Belasco and started work on her new concept of dance. *Egypta,* as she thought of it, was beyond her financial means to mount but she was led to still other quarters of the ancient world and its spiritual arts. With the help of nothing but encyclopedia articles and visits to Coney Island to see Oriental or pseudo-Oriental dancers on the midway, she created her first history-making dances: *The Incense,* an invocation to the gods; *The Cobras,* a characterization of a street beggar whose arms moved as snakes; and *Radha,* a ballet of the Hindu goddess who preached to her followers on the renunciation of the senses. None was authentically Indian, all were built upon her own imaginings yet they managed, as time was to prove, to capture the very spirit of India.

Appearances in vaudeville in nautch-type solos and performances at society gatherings helped raise the money to produce *Radha.*

Genevieve Stebbins, American exponent and teacher of the Delsarte system (*Werner's Magazine*, May, 1900)

When in 1906, Ruth St. Denis made her formal debut in New York as a new revolutionary of the dance, her program included all three Indian works.

The first performance took place at a Sunday evening "smoking concert"; next came an engagement at Proctor's and, lastly, the first solo recital, a matinee at the Hudson Theatre which became an extended engagement. The new prophet was not immediately hailed by the press or public. There was a certain success on the surface, for the bare feet and bare midriff stirred the interest of the wise-cracking

men at the "smoking concert"; the exoticism of the costumes and the strangeness of the movements piqued the interest of many; there were useful (commercially) cries of "shocking!" and ignorant reporters, while making gags about the "Jersey Hindoo," gave her publicity of sorts.

An offer to appear in London came as the promise of new adventure. The intelligentsia had flocked to her Hudson series and to her performances for society in Boston and Washington. Surely, Europe would be even more understanding. But London found her chiefly "charming"; the public, with the exception of notable artists and intellectuals, preferred their ballet spectacles. In Paris, St. Denis played a successful engagement. Yet again, she was discontent, for Paris had been entertained but not truly responsive to that spiritual message which was the core of the St. Denis concept of dance.

Next came Germany and Austria and here, Ruth St. Denis found a new world. Like Isadora shortly before, she was treated as

Ruth St. Denis with her company of Hindus in *The Cobras,* 1906-8. Photograph by Ellis and Walery, London (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

an artist, a thinker, a creator and although a group of German doctors asked to investigate the arms which she rippled so subtly in *The Incense* (they thought she must have extra joints or no bones at all), she was not looked upon as a strange phenomenon. So great was her success in Central Europe that she remained for two years. Berlin was willing and eager to build her a theatre of her own if she would stay, and the temptation to remain was almost overwhelming. Hugo von Hofmannstahl, the Viennese poet had written of her, "The Incomparable Dancer. . . . It [her dance] borders on voluptuousness but it is chaste. It is consecrated to the senses, but it is a symbol of something higher. It is wild, but bound by external laws." Still others balanced, compared, related her art to the other arts and their highest flowerings and they made her feel that she was not merely an Oriental dancer but, rather, a unique artist with something of special value to give to the world.

By this time, her basic approach to dance was clearly formulated, although instinct continued to guide her and supplementary movement discoveries were yet to come. She believed in the unshod foot and unencumbered body, free to move without the restraints of traditional clothes; movement born of the idea as opposed to a set vocabulary; the use of breath rhythm (as distinct from external metric rhythm) as an emotional barometer; articulation of the torso (she did not know of Isadora's theories on the solar plexus and she never centered her movement specifically in that area unless a given dance called for it); the calculated use of the unseen planes of space. Her sources of inspiration were mainly spiritual. Always she had been concerned with "dancing about God" and she had chosen Oriental forms because dance and religion were inseparable in the Orient while the religion of the West had long since divorced itself from dance. Finally, her method of creation was chiefly theatrical. She started with an idea (invocation, renunciation of the senses, compassion, mystery and, sometimes, a secular theme); next she selected the character or characters best suited to communicate the idea; the specific culture (Egypt, India, Greece, etc.) was then chosen and, lastly, the period or era. For all, she required costumes (usually elaborate) suitable to her idea, impressive settings and/or décor and, often, many properties. Music—although she was intensely musical—was never of much concern. Unless, as in later years, a given piece of fine music was the source of her inspiration (as in her music

Ruth St. Denis with Doris Humphrey, Edna Malone and Betty Horst in *Greek Veil Plastique,* vaudeville tour, 1918. Photograph by Witzel, Los Angeles (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

visualizations), she selected her music on the basis of its serviceability as a support, rhythmic and with necessary ethnic flavors, to her dance dramas. Next to the dance itself, lighting was all important.

These characteristics of creation grew and were nurtured during her two years abroad. But although they were understood and deeply admired far more than they had been at home, she returned to New York in 1909.

The St. Denis career from that time until the present is known to all associated with dance. The postponed *Egypta* was produced; *O-Mika,* a Japanese dance-drama came next; *Yogi* and *The Green Nautch,* created in Europe, were added to the repertory and still other works were composed for concerts and for vaudeville engagements (necessary to defray the expenses of new productions). St. Denis, with the approval of Europe to support her, became an American star.

In 1914, she met and married an already successful young dancer-innovator named Ted Shawn. In the years which followed,

they built their company of Denishawn Dancers into America's leading dance attraction and, indeed, into the major touring show of the day. Schools were established to train youngsters in the Denishawn concept of an "all-inclusive dance" which embraced Delsarte principles, Oriental and other ethnic styles, adapted ballet, free style movement, primitive forms and whatever other materials the founders believed to be of value. Doris Humphrey, Martha Graham and Charles Weidman (later to lead the development of modern dance)

Ruth St. Denis as an Ouled Nail in *Vision of the Aissoua,* 1924. Photograph by Edmonston, Washington, D.C. (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

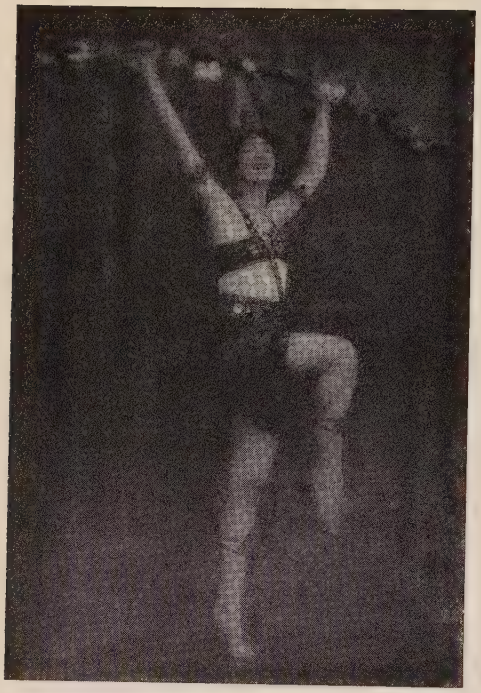
were Denishawn products and others, less well known today but important during the 1914-1930 period, carried the Denishawn way into schools, studios and theatres. For seventeen years, St. Denis, Shawn and their Denishawn Dancers toured America almost annually or traveled abroad. In 1925-1926, St. Denis, with Shawn and their company, finally visited the Orient which, more than twenty years before, had given her, long-distance, the vision of a dance which was to make her famous.

In 1931, St. Denis and Shawn parted, and the Denishawn Dancers were no more. To her repertory, St. Denis had added, over the years, other nautch dances, her ever-popular *Liebestraum,* music visualizations, the Babylonian ballet of *Ishtar of the Seven Gates,* solos in classic Greek style, *The Peacock, White Jade, Kwannon, Angkor Vat* (a large scale ballet), the metaphysical *The Lamp* and innumerable other creations, both large and small, ethnic and abstract, spiritual and secular.

With the separation, she turned more and more to Christian religious themes, dancing frequently in churches or presenting her rhythmic choirs in studio performances. In 1947, she made Hollywood her headquarters and there established her Church of the Divine Dance to build a dance liturgy comparable in quality and, ultimately, in quantity to the musical liturgies of the contemporary Christian churches. All faiths, however, were welcomed and St. Denis herself participated in services involving dance expressions and ceremonies of various denominations and religions.

At present (1959-1960), Ruth St. Denis, in her eighties, continues to teach, plan, create and perform. Her historic solos, now more than half a century old, remain in her repertory but they are augmented constantly by new works, such as the patriotic *Freedom,* created in 1955, and *The Blue Madonna of St. Marks,* composed in 1959. A dancer for more than sixty years, the First Lady of the American Dance, as she has been called by her affectionate and respectful admirers, still looks to the future, believing that her vision of dance has yet to be fully realized.

Right: Ted Shawn in *O Brother Sun and Sister Moon,* a study of St. Francis of Assisi, 1931. Photograph by Ralph Hawkins. Below: Ruth St. Denis with Rhythmic Choir, c. 1930. Photograph by Amador-Wehry (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)



Left: Doris Humphrey as a Denishawn dancer, c. 1920 (Collection of Charles Humphrey Woodford)

Right: Martha Graham and Ted Shawn in *Malagueña,* 1921. Photograph by Witzel, Los Angeles (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

There are several methods by which we can explore the nature of American dance as it exists today and trace its ancestry to either Isadora Duncan or Ruth St. Denis. Or, perhaps, to both. One way is to ask the dancing children themselves. True, there are in life some children who do not know who their parents really are; there are orphans; there are those who reject their parents. Still, most have a devotion to those who brought them into the world, in this case, the world of dancing. Let us see what several of these have to say.

For these interviews, I have selected a group of important dancers and choreographers and a few junior dance artists of growing promise. I have omitted those who are inactive or not well known or who function for a limited public. This, on the surface, seems to stack the cards against Isadora, for two things are indisputably true: 1, Isadora spent most of her performing and teaching career in Europe while St. Denis performed and taught almost entirely in America; 2, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman sprang from the companies and schools of St. Denis and Shawn and, as three of the principal modern dancers of the first generation in America (the other two are Helen Tamiris and Hanya Holm), passed on their heritage to yet another generation. Furthermore there is no major American dancer active today who is a product of Isadora or of her method. Her immediate associates continued her work after her death. Her sister Elizabeth taught for many years. Irma toured America successfully with a group of Duncan dancers in the late twenties and continued the instructional side of Isadora's work with classes and writings. Anna Duncan, Maria-Theresa, Anita Zahn and others have carried on the Duncan tradition and Duncan classes are still taught. But where is a dancer or choreographer in concert, on Broadway, on educational films or television or, shall we say, in the public eye who is exclusively or even mainly a Duncan dancer?

Now this would seem to end the controversy, but it does not. St. Denis never really liked to teach technique or, if so, only sporadically and the Denishawn Schools would most probably never have come into existence and risen to nationwide prominence if it had not been for Ted Shawn. Irma Duncan, in her book, *The Technique of*

Isadora Duncan, reports that Isadora was impatient as a teacher and that on one frustrating occasion with a group of pupils she said, "How strange, I created it, and I can dance it, but I cannot teach it!" (this in reference to a movement sequence she had devised for a class).

So we must go beyond the area of classroom teaching to determine the true mother of the American dance.

In spite of the names of the artists I have interviewed on this subject, none of whom had a direct association with Isadora, the jury has not been packed against her as we shall soon see, for although Isadora is long dead and St. Denis is a remote (to many) living legend, time has wrought a new perspective and it is this perspective which we seek here.

Sadly, Isadora cannot be interviewed. Whether or not she ever saw Ruth St. Denis remains uncertain. At least she does not write about her and she did not live long enough to see the course which American dance was to take. Happily, St. Denis is still with us and in her, peculiarly enough, Isadora has a champion. Not that St. Denis is willing to relinquish the belief that she is the founder of American dance but she is willing to share the title, not only with Isadora but also, in a world-dance sense, with Loie Fuller.

RUTH ST. DENIS

I interviewed "Miss Ruth" (as she is called today) in the fall of 1959. First, she recalled seeing Isadora dance in London about 1900 when St. Denis was performing in *Zaza* with the Belasco company. "It was at the Duke of York's Theatre and there were only about fifty people in the audience. At that time, Isadora was merely a name to me. She used two amber spots (she seemed to like the shadows) and her curtains. Her dress appeared to be pinned on, almost in disarray, but she walked with great dignity to the center of the stage and waited. And as she danced, she invoked in her audience every last ounce of poetry in them. She did not startle nor plead; she evoked.

"Her beautiful arms were extended; her placid face, looking up over her shoulder suddenly transformed her into a Bacchante. She was Greece not by research or imitation but by divine inheritance, for Greece is a state of mind. She was, as I remember it, the embodiment of cosmic rhythm. She was seized upon by outgoing rhythms.

Antoine Bourdelle. "Isadora Dansant," c. 1912 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

She would have danced whether she had music or not. I know this sounds strange because she was the first to use great music for dance but somehow, to me, it seemed in later years that she was the only one who did not rely on music. The rhythms came from her own being."

Looking back on the careers of Isadora and herself, Miss Ruth said: "When I saw Isadora again, years later, in California she inspired me to do something by what she did *not* do. When she danced to symphonies, she reacted to them and danced when it pleased her to dance. If the music was too fast, she postured. This was all right for her because she was glorious. But for me, watching her, I thought that what I would use in such a case would be a symphony of dancers moving to a musical symphony. Thus, my idea for the synchoric orchestra was born."

She continued: "America, at the turn of the century, was ill-prepared to follow Isadora. Only a few had the discernment to recognize her principles. The same, of course, was true of my work in the early days. But there was a difference between us. When Isadora taught, the most powerful thing students got was spirit, the outpour-

ing of her spirit. In my case, students quite probably missed the purpose of my rituals but by learning my way, they wound up with routines (the shells of what I stood for) perfectly usable in the theatre.

"Today, in America, Isadora is a greater influence than she was during her lifetime, for our awareness of dance is infinitely deeper than it used to be. In retrospect, then, her importance has grown immeasurably. You must remember that when we were both starting out we represented a new, raw American art struggling to parallel a traditional and subsidized art. Although we achieved comparatively quick success in the theatre (Isadora always captured her audiences), it took time for the principles for which we stood to penetrate the art of dance itself."

In conclusion, Miss Ruth talked briefly of the differences between them: "Isadora did not have what I would call a 'school' technique; she was herself; and, as I say, because my concepts found formal outlet in ritual-style dances, I did have a theatre technique

Isadora Duncan by Hubert Stowitts. From an original sketch done in France, 1927 (Constance Paget-Fredericks Memorial Collection)

which I could pass on to others. Both of us influenced the dress of women, and for the better, but I will lay claim to what I will call, with my usual Irish levity, the 'separation of church and state'; in other words, the introduction of the bare midriff. The sari I used and other portions of my Oriental costumes were the models for this innovation in the underwear (and beach wear) of ordinary women.

"I think both of us believed that there is no age to love or creation, that only the manifestations change and that you cannot be a great dancer unless you have experienced love, passion, even lust. Each of us has stated our principles differently, although they are related in many ways, just as we chose different ways of putting them to use. I guess you can say that the matter comes down to my formality and ritualism versus Isadora's spontaneity."

Suddenly, she dipped into that huge, inevitable bag of hers which seems to contain everything from bits of costume to phonograph records, photographs and old shoes, and came out with a battered notebook. Turning the pages, she stopped at something she had written in 1943: "I am standing in front of a life-size painting of Isadora Duncan by Hubert Stowitts, the painter-dancer.

"I am amazed first of all at this stroke of genius in capturing Isadora's embodiment of the Rhythmic Spirit of Life.

"It not only recalls to me the first time I saw her dance in London but it causes me again to realize the strangely beautiful revelation of sheer rhythm, sheer beauty that she gave the world. No wonder the poets and artists sought to catch fire from her natural, heaven-born genius.

"Stowitts has used the conscious knowledge of form and color, which he possesses to an incredible degree, to let through the finest vibration of Isadora's spirit, as she danced before the world like a child, like an inspired being whose sources were largely unknown to herself.

"The uplift of her head here in this amazing production, her outstretched arms and flower-like hands all tell with consummate suggestion the perfectly limpid, effortless flow of unending rhythm that was hers to give.

"This portrait is all her dances. She is moving slowly towards her audience while paying tribute to heaven in her upward gazing eyes. Presently . . . she will bring life into her two hands as a benediction to those who have the waiting soul to receive it."

Loie Fuller. Drawing by Gaston Noury (Collection of A. J. Pischl)

But Ruth St. Denis, for all her genuine admiration for Isadora and her unique perceptiveness into the Duncan art, does not concede her exclusive credit as a founder of American dance. "I personally feel that Loie Fuller has been neglected. She brought appurtenances —lights and veils—to dance and where would I be, pray, without my lights? where would Isadora have been without her simple lighting effects? where would the theatre dancers of today find themselves without Loie's magnificent contributions?"

Obviously, Isadora agreed with St. Denis on the genius of Loie Fuller. In her autobiography, she wrote of this "luminous vision" with passion and respect: ". . . the sorcery of light, color, flowing form. What an extraordinary genius! No imitator of Loie Fuller has

ever been able to hint at her genius! . . . She was one of the first original inspirations of light and changing color. I returned to the hotel dazzled and carried away by this marvelous artist."

The living contender believes this is the answer: "There is, I think, a triumvirate of contemporary dance pioneers. Isadora, Loie and myself. Although Loie was older than either Isadora or I, we were basically contemporaries and although we went our own ways and did individual things, we presided over the birth of a new era in the art of dance. Yes, I think your only answer is a maternal triumvirate."

MARTHA GRAHAM

Martha Graham came to Denishawn in Los Angeles as a young girl in the year 1916 and before long became one of the principal dancers in the Denishawn company and, in vaudeville units prepared by Ted Shawn, a star in her own right. In her autobiography, Ruth St. Denis says, "My direct work with Martha was very slight. She soon joined Ted's classes and she owes her professional development to the deep concern and affection that Ted had for her during those early years. But she is kind enough to say that the influence of my personality and work was a large factor in her life."

In 1923, Miss Graham left Denishawn and two years later started the experimentation, work and self-study which were soon to make her the first major modern dancer in America and, ultimately, a dancer-choreographer of international renown.

Here, now, are Martha Graham's thoughts on Duncan and St. Denis.

"We're washed by two oceans, the Atlantic and the Pacific. For Isadora, the adventure was toward the Atlantic and Greece; for Miss Ruth, toward the Pacific and the Orient. But this is logical, for not only are we a polyglot people but, geographically, we are in a curious position, a commercial nation in the middle, one side of us facing the old world of Europe, the other the ancient East. It is not so strange that the two great dance figures of our time came from us, America, but what is strange is that Isadora traveled all the way from San Francisco across a continent to reach her Greek ideal while Miss Ruth, from her home near the Atlantic turned her head and her heart across a continent to the Orient. We have in American dance

Opposite page: Snapshot of Isadora Duncan dancing in a Greek theatre in Athens, 1904 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library). Below: Figures on the Temple of Athena Nike, Athens (Pierre Devanbez, *La Sculpture Grecque,* Paris, 1938). Isadora always carried with her several post card pictures of the sculptures on this temple

Opposite page: Ruth St. Denis in *Radha,* 1906 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library). Below: Krishna approaching Radha, c. 1650, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (W. G. Archer, *Indian Painting,* London, 1956). Radha, consort of the god Krishna, was a symbol of the human soul loved by the divine

not one mother but two, Isadora and Miss Ruth, the West and the East. And to go back for a moment to what I said about our geographical position as a nation, a great deal has to do with trade. We are between old nations of both West and East, both have influenced us, both have stirred us. Miss Ruth and Isadora mirrored this pattern."

Then Miss Graham went on to say that in the formative days of the new dance at the turn of the century, there were only two genuine creators, Isadora and Miss Ruth. Loie Fuller, she felt, could not be included.

"Isadora's influence," she asserted, "is stronger today than when she was living. She was an influence upon the young Fokine but musically her line of influence has extended through Massine to Balanchine. I can even see her influence in the work Doris Humphrey

Martha Graham as the Sorceress in her *Cave of the Heart*, 1946. Photograph by Sam Falk

has done over the years, not in style at all but in her treatment of music in lyric form.

"Miss Ruth and Isadora, although they differed in many ways, had certain qualities in common. Both were concerned with the cultivation of the being and, in somewhat different ways, with the cultivation of technique. Love of spirit and love of life made them both. Both, rather like the Hindu's goddess Kali, had beneficent and horrific aspects. Both were extraordinary women at the turn of the times.

"My answer? We have been blessed in dance by a double matriarch, Isadora and Miss Ruth."

DORIS HUMPHREY

Doris Humphrey, after several years of preliminary dance training, teaching and performing in her native Oak Park, Ill., traveled to Los Angeles in 1917 where she entered the Denishawn school and joined the Denishawn company. Her principal teacher was Ruth St. Denis with whom she worked very closely after she had become a leading dancer in the Denishawn company and in Miss St. Denis' own concert group. She left Denishawn in 1927.

The late Miss Humphrey happened never to discuss with me the subject of Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan. Later in this essay, José Limón brings her into his comments on the pioneers. Miss Humphrey, however, in her book, *The Art of Making Dances* (published posthumously), does not select her favorite but does make some important remarks about the contributions of both.

At one point, she writes: "At the turn of the fabulous twentieth century, two American girls, widely separated in space and unknown to each other, had a vision of a new dance, with its roots in the past, but its expansive ideas firmly in the present. These two were Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis. Their inheritors took the life-giving substance from their hands, molded it in ever-expanding ways, and made of it the contemporary dance art." Miss Humphrey also states: ". . . not until the twentieth century has dance been anything but a light frill on the edges of western civilization. Against the face of this entrenched opinion, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis had the audacity to throw a well-aimed gauntlet. No wonder the world was astonished that these two considered dance, of all things, a serious art, made of soul-stuff. They danced about states of being—

Left: Doris Humphrey, before 1917 (Collection of Charles Humphrey Woodford)

Right: Lucas Hoving, Ruth Currier and Betty Jones in Doris Humphrey's *Night Spell,* 1951. Photograph by Walter Strate

heroic, tragic and mystical—in terms which went far deeper than the current amusing charm."

I cannot, of course, say whether Miss Humphrey would have felt that one of these two pioneers had a greater influence than the other. Her book suggests that she thought of them, historically at least, as co-equal. And I include these brief quotations here, in lieu of an interview which could not be, because of Miss Humphrey's stature as one of the great leaders of America's modern dance, as one of the world's great choreographers and as one whose direction and advice were sought by many dancers for many years.

CHARLES WEIDMAN

Charles Weidman, journeying from his native Nebraska, came to the Denishawn School in Los Angeles in 1920. In a short time, he became a member of the Denishawn company and rose swiftly to the rank of principal dancer in the troupe. In 1927, he and Doris Humphrey left Denishawn to form their own school and to establish the Humphrey-Weidman Dancers, a major company on the Ameri-

Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey in Miss Humphrey's *Duo Drama,* 1935 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

Charles Weidman in his *Dance Profane*, 1930. Photograph by Helen Hewett (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

can scene for almost fifteen years. With his late partner and on his own, Weidman has made a place for himself in American dance history both as a performer and as a choreographer.

"You cannot separate the two," says Weidman, "for they are rather like a plaque, evenly divided between two colors. We moderns actually revolted against both Isadora and Miss Ruth but we also retained a belief in both. For example, Duncan dance itself is not for me, but Isadora's principles and her wonderful spirit are eternal. On the other side, I can say that exposure to Denishawn was valuable theatrically but this is a secondary matter. I would say that *working* with Miss Ruth herself in a studio, or simply being with her, was more important than what transpired on stage.

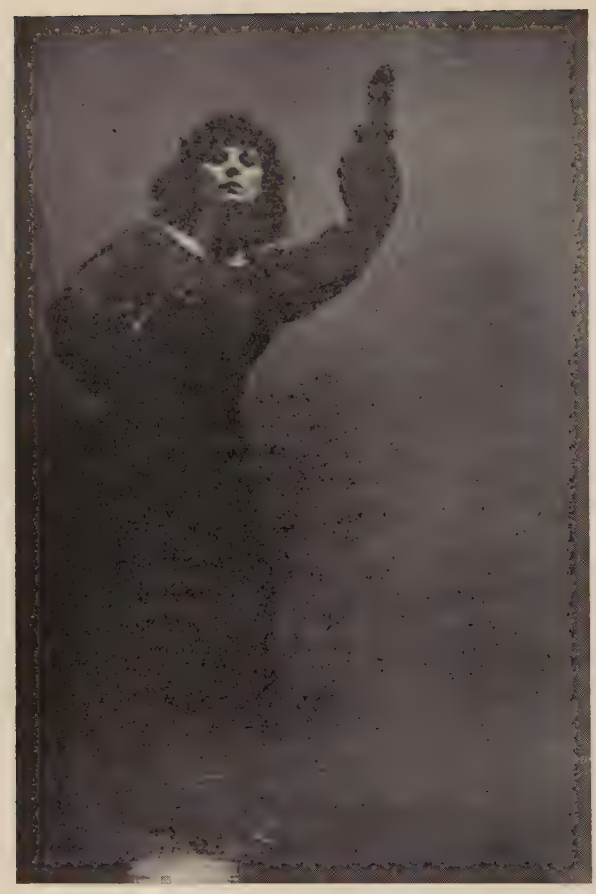
"Yes, I rebelled against the forms of both but I respected the basic beliefs. They both belong. Together, they are the dance plaque."

HELEN TAMIRIS

Helen Tamiris, one of the chief leaders of America's modern dance, a concert dancer of unique qualities, a teacher and a choreographer for both the dance theatre and the popular musical theatre, was not a graduate of Denishawn. As a child, she had her first dance training at the Henry Street Playhouse in classes conducted by Irene Lewisohn, a pupil of Genevieve Stebbins, who was a disciple of Delsarte and who had made an impression on St. Denis. (It should be noted that Miss Lewisohn did not teach Delsarte methods but, from these beginnings, evolved her own form of interpretive dance.) Later, Helen Tamiris studied ballet, and danced, at the Metropolitan Opera.

"In all of my teaching," she says, "I go back to Duncan's philosophic point of view. Her dance was expressive of the human being, the person in his emotional, philosophic, psychological natures. When I was in my teens, I saw her last performance in the New York area, in Brooklyn. One moment in particular stunned me. She was dancing the *Pathétique*. She started on the ground, lying close to the floor and—it took a long time—the only physical action was the very slow movement which carried her from prone to erect with arms outstretched. At the finish, everyone was crying and I was crying too,

Drawing by José Clará
(*Isadora Duncan*, Paris, 1928)



Helen Tamiris in her *Mirages,* 1931. Photograph by Thomas Bouchard

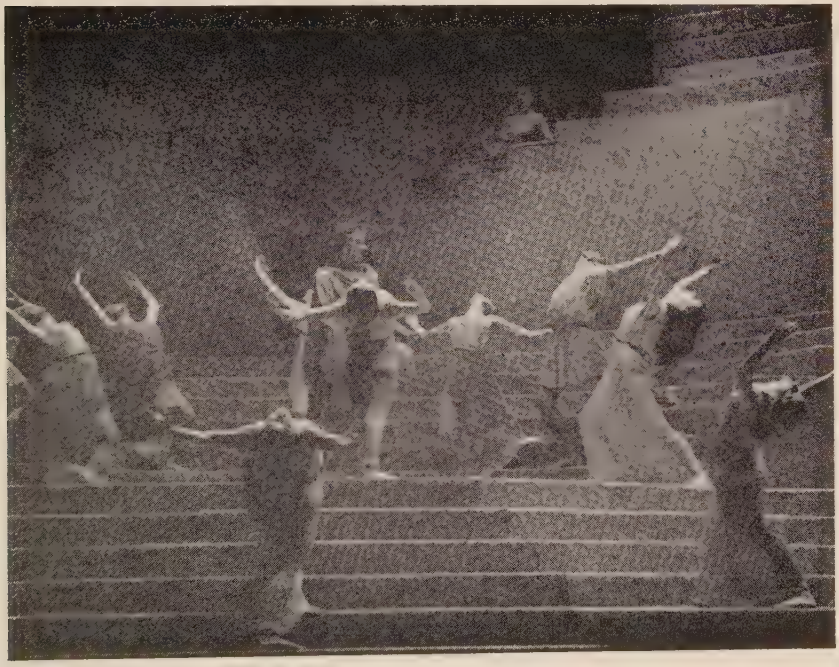
although it took me many years to understand what she was doing—that she was living an action or an inner motivation and I was living with her. Years later, while teaching a class, the incident came back to mind. That movement made dance clear to me, that here was dance by and through the human being. Although the content of my own dances was different, this concept, I can say with truthfulness, made possible my career."

As for the parallel influences of Duncan and St. Denis, Miss Tamiris concludes: "For me, there is only Duncan as a source of historic inspiration but for many others, both Duncan and St. Denis

exert their powers. Martha, Doris and Charles all came from Denishawn. Martha's approach is basically Oriental, you can see it in her manipulation of materials and in her mysticism—she is an extension of Miss Ruth. Doris, I think, worked more along the lines conceived by Duncan. For others, I would say, that Duncan and St. Denis exert varying degrees of influence and, in the years to come, one may predominate for a while, then the other. Both expressed different attitudes. St. Denis is characterized by mystical overtones, by religious expression; Duncan was earthy, non-mystical. Which do you prefer, Whitman or Poe? or, in dance history, who was greater, the earthy Elssler or the spiritual Taglioni? I'm not a mystic. For me, it is Duncan."

HANYA HOLM

Hanya Holm, German-born dancer and choreographer, had her early training in the Jaques-Dalcroze system of eurhythmics and later moved on to become a key figure in Mary Wigman's performing and



The Elysian Fields scene from Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice,* choreography by Hanya Holm, 1959 Vancouver International Festival. Photograph by Marshall Brooks

educational organizations. In 1931, she headed a branch of the Wigman school in New York but shortly thereafter changed it to a school bearing her own name, a school which presented Wigman principles of movement adapted to the needs and characteristics of Americans. She has created for both the concert dance and the popular field of musical comedy.

Because of her European background, Miss Holm holds a viewpoint on Duncan and St. Denis which differs from those of dancers brought up in America. "For me," she says, "Isadora was the first modern dancer in Europe. She broke down the conventions and opened new gates. When St. Denis came later, I thought of her as an Oriental, an ethnic dancer. It was Duncan who was really bold, the firebrand. Since then, I have come to realize that what Duncan did was to release the body and the emotions. Her offerings seemed spontaneous, the inspiration of the moment. Ruth, on the other hand, had greater shape and control—she was motivated by what she *thought* as well as by what she *felt*. Therefore, I think that Ruth has been a greater influence in America, theatrically speaking, because by allying herself with Oriental rituals, she had a form to pass on."

Miss Holm continues: "Today, I think, Isadora's influence is strong in America. Form to her was unimportant and she left us no dance disciplines other than children's steps, skips, runs, hops and the like. There are no successors to her, yet the impact is present because Isadora was dedicated to dance and this sense of dedication stimulates our dancers to this day. Isadora symbolized a burning ideal. Ruth used her mind and intelligence to put her ideas into movement principles so solid and practical that they could be used by other dancers. Isadora was unequalled in her spirit of freedom; she was but one person, nontransferrable, who traveled on ether to the moon. Ruth held her theatre art close to earth. But consider the times in which they started. It is clear that we needed them both."

JOSÉ LIMÓN

José Limón is the foremost male dancer in the modern dance field and one of the leading choreographers of our day. His principal training was at the Humphrey-Weidman School and the late Miss Humphrey was for years the artistic director of his company.

"The first bolt of lightning for me," says José Limón, "was see-

José Limón, 1952. Photograph by Magda Farkas, Mexico City

ing Kreutzberg dance. 'This I must do or I'll die!' was my instant response to his dancing. I then went to Doris and Charles for a few lessons in New York and then returned to my home in California. All I knew about dancing was what I had seen in Kreutzberg and running across the floor to music of Bach in Doris' classes. Then, in California, I read Isadora's *My Life* and I became incandescent with the desire to dance. She was my dance mother, the Dionysian, the drunken spirit of the soul. And today, when I compose, I try to capture that Dionysian ecstasy of Isadora's as she wrote about it in *My Life*."
The impact of Isadora's autobiography compelled Limón to return to New York, to the Humphrey-Weidman School and to a life dedi-

Left: Ruth Currier in José Limón's lyric *Ode to the Dance,* 1954. Photograph by Arnold Eagle. Below: José Limón, Betty Jones, Pauline Koner and Lucas Hoving in Mr. Limón's *The Moor's Pavane,* 1949, based on Shakespeare's *Othello.* Photograph by Bradley Smith

cated to dance. "I am aware now," he says, "of my dance ancestry, of my co-mothers, Isadora and Miss Ruth, for they both gave birth to American dance.

"I came to Doris and Charles with the Dionysian pulse of Isadora, but Doris taught me not only of the Dionysian, as represented in her use of the fall, but also of the Apollonian, as manifest in balance. Of course, I have a passion in my life for Isadora; her principles and her spirit have guided me. But I recognize Miss Ruth's influences also. The utter glory of music (Isadora's approach) moves me; yet my most effective dances have been about our common humanity and here I subjugate the glory of music and pursue that dramatic line which was Miss Ruth's particular strength.

"I never saw Isadora and I did not see Miss Ruth dance until she had reached her mellow, crepuscular period but I think I can recognize the influences of both. The technical influence is from Miss Ruth by way of Doris and Charles. In Charles, I feel, the St. Denis influence is strong, especially in the use of the arms. His *Kinetic Pantomime* is filled with adapted Orientalisms. Doris, Charles and I have all used, often percussively, hand actions stemming from Miss Ruth's Oriental qualities; perhaps, even the placement of the head at times recalls the Javanese. I do remember that one of my first works, *Danza,* was filled with wrist and arms actions that came from Miss Ruth.

"Although Isadora is my special inspiration, not one day of my thirty years as a dancer has gone by without one or the other, Duncan or St. Denis, poking me, inspiring me. Both women were profound humanists; one (Isadora) the great free spirit and the other (Miss Ruth) the theatrical genius of her day. Modern dance could not have come into existence without them both.

"But I have referred to them as my co-mothers. Actually, they are grandmothers. Doris was my dance mother and these two were my formidable ancestresses. I only hope that I have been worthy of them."

As we finished the interview, Mr. Limón and I were looking at some of those superb action drawings which Abraham Walkowitz had done of Isadora and a selection of dance photographs. One picture of St. Denis, taken a few years ago by the dancer, Ralph McWilliams, caught Mr. Limón's attention. This photograph shows Miss St. Denis, out-of-doors, with arms outstretched. When she first saw it herself,

Isadora Duncan in the garden of her school, Paris, 1919
(Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

she noted that for years she had tried unsuccessfully to analyze a special quality in one of Isadora's attitudes. "I think I almost captured it here," she had murmured. Mr. Limón, looking at it, spoke softly: "The two great mothers have met here in one terrible and beautiful moment. This is the instant of union."

AGNES DE MILLE

Miss de Mille, who numbers among her awesome array of talents and attributes a pithy wit, when asked to decide between Duncan and St. Denis, replied, "Neither." Then, "Isadora cleared away the rubbish. She was a gigantic broom. There has never been such a

theatre cleaning! St. Denis? Miss Ruth reminded us of older and greater dances. Her chief purpose in showing us these old dances dedicated to worship was that dancing could be serious."

Miss de Mille, though exposed to Denishawn as a young girl through a long family friendship with St. Denis and Ted Shawn, was in no sense a Denishawn product. For her, the great impact was Anna Pavlova. "When Pavlova came, every gene in my body changed. Of course, I wouldn't be here without Miss Ruth or Isadora and neither would any member of my generation, but I do not feel a direct line of descent from them in the artistic sense. Artistically, my sources are folk dance and ballet, but Martha Graham has influenced

Ruth St. Denis at Jacob's Pillow, Lee, Mass., 1951. Photograph by Ralph McWilliams

me and so has La Argentina. Actually, I'm a theatre person rather than a purist. I was a better actor than I was a dancer. I have mixed styles. I would like to compose like Balanchine but scant chance! You just do what you can.

"Miss Ruth, I remember encouraged people to dance as they felt like dancing. That's important. It was also important that nice girls were permitted to attend Miss Ruth's classes. Their parents didn't have to fear that the little ones were being trained to be harlots. Dancers of an earlier day sometimes led pretty racy lives. Even the best ballerinas were concerned only with giving the public the best technique possible. Miss Ruth aimed much higher. She saw dance as religion."

Continuing, Miss de Mille said, "Isadora's effect on Russian ballet is incalculable. Miss Ruth reminded us all of seriousness of purpose. But I think neither is the founder of American modern dance. Martha is the supreme force. Her compositions are masterful. Martha is the one."

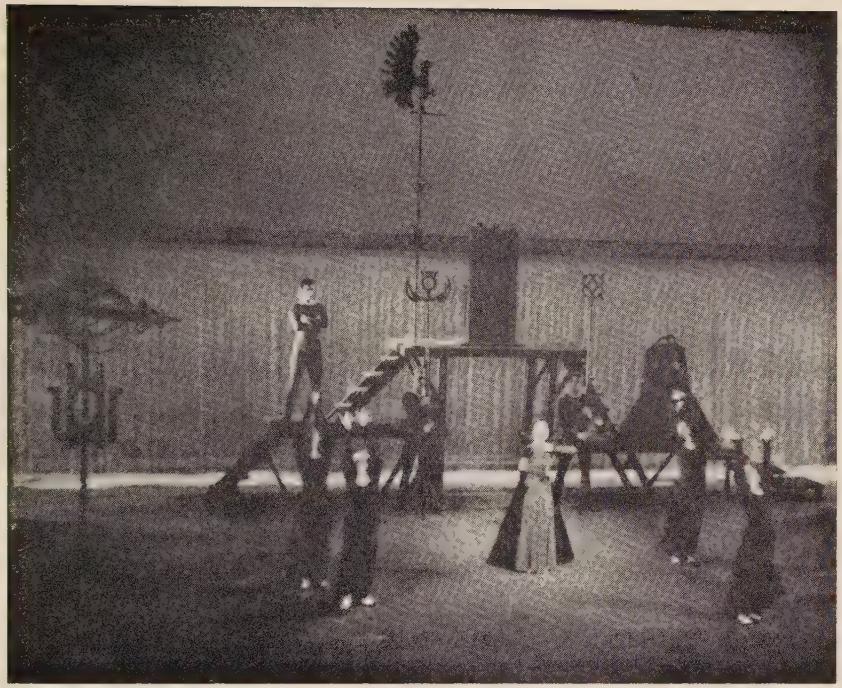
JOHN BUTLER

John Butler, dancer and choreographer for concert, opera, musicals and motion pictures, had been closely associated in the past with Martha Graham both as her student and as a dancer in her company.

"I never saw Isadora Duncan, of course," says Butler, "and I have never met Miss St. Denis but I feel her influence through Martha. I lean more toward the theatrical, as Miss St. Denis does, rather than toward the lyrical, which Duncan represented. This heritage from Ruth St. Denis is one that I feel, for not only have I never had the opportunity to talk with her, I have seen her dance very infrequently. I think of Duncan as a Colette who danced, warm, sensual, free, and I know she broke the constricting mold of traditional ballet in Europe. But I feel that this great woman, although she herself must have been warm, sensual and free, left us, except for her personal legend, only scarves, recitals and poor, self-expressive children. Miss Ruth's theatrical force, on the other hand, has gone ahead in ever new directions. For me, my ancestress is Ruth St. Denis."

DONALD SADDLER

Donald Saddler, dancer and choreographer, stems from neither Duncan nor St. Denis. Almost exclusively ballet trained, his work



Martha Graham and her company in *Episodes,* 1959. Photograph by Martha Swope

as a choreographer for both ballet and the musical theatre (stage and television) has caused him to expand his horizons beyond the area of traditional ballet.

"When I was quite young, I saw Miss St. Denis dance and I experienced a personal response to the impact of her performing. But I have had no first-hand contact with either Duncan or St. Denis or with their immediate descendants. However, as a long-time, devoted student of Carmelita Maracci, I learned through her enthusiasm to respect the varied contributions of Duncan, Pavlova, Loie Fuller, Kreutzberg, Angna Enters and Martha Graham. Carmelita, unorthodox herself and incredibly versatile, made all of us who studied with her understand and respect the special influences which these artists had on different areas of dance. I owe, then, something to all the truly great artists of dance, among them, Duncan and St. Denis, but my training with Maracci has led me to find inspiration not from one or two but from the many."

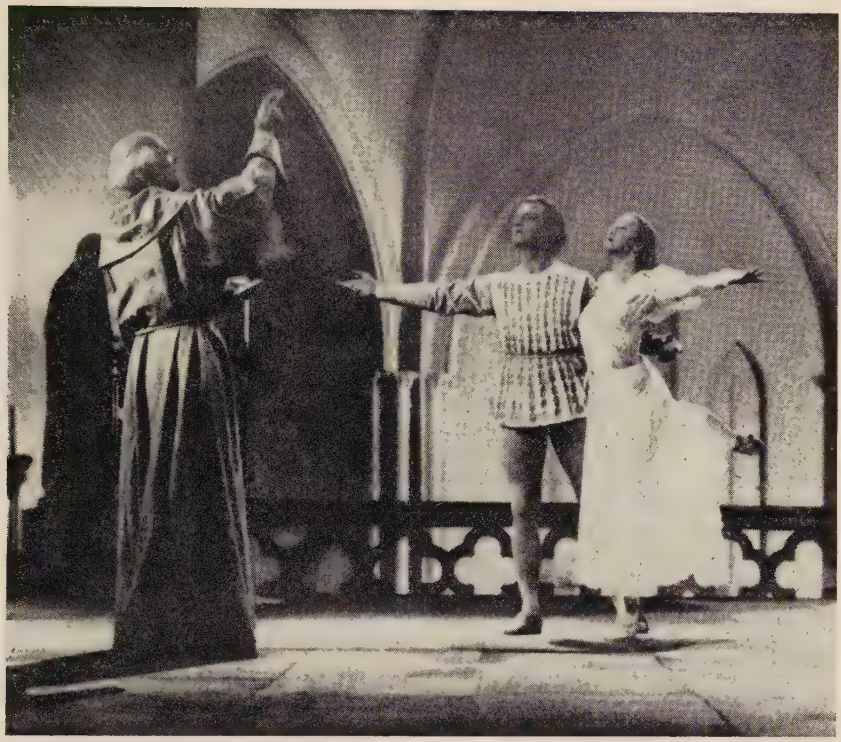
LILLIAN MOORE

As a dancer, Lillian Moore has been associated almost exclusively with ballet but as one of the world's foremost dance historians, she is a keen researcher and observer of all forms of dance and their inescapable overlappings.

"Ruth St. Denis," says Miss Moore, "through her artistic descendants, has had a greater influence on American dance than has Isadora Duncan. The St. Denis eclecticism gave a broad range to dance in America. Actually, the theatre dance principles which she formulated and developed are apparent to me even in *West Side Story,* although the theme would have been remote from her interest.

"Isadora's influence, on the other hand, is still present in ballet. We all know that she influenced Fokine considerably, and he used the natural movement that she envisioned within the framework of

Tatiana Riabouchinska as the Florentine Maiden in the Original Ballet Russe production of Fokine's *Paganini,* 1940. Photograph by H. P. Hall, Melbourne



Lev Loschilin, Yuri Zhdanov and Galina Ulanova in the marriage scene from *Romeo and Juliet,* film version of the Soviet ballet by Leonid Lavrovsky, 1955 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

classic ballet technique. The dance of the Florentine Maiden in his *Paganini* is but one of many examples of this master's application of Duncan lyricism and sense of free-flowing movement. We can also see the Duncan influence in contemporary American ballet. Normally, we think of Balanchine's style as strongly influenced by that of Petipa and this would be the antithesis of what Duncan represented. But even Balanchine has another facet to his creative approach, and in such pieces as *Allegro Brillante* we can see the line of Fokine and, through it, the inspiration of Duncan. In Russia today, her influence is apparent in the free and lyric elements which Soviet choreographers apply to their work.

"For *ballet* in toto, I would say that Isadora was the greater influence; for our *dance* here in America, it would be Miss Ruth."

Drawing of Isadora Duncan by Abraham Walkowitz, 1906-8 (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

GENEVIEVE OSWALD

Genevieve Oswald is curator of the Dance Collection of The New York Public Library.

Miss Oswald reports that Duncan material is requested more often than material on any other individual by those visiting the Dance Collection and using its vast resources. "But," she says, "Isadora seems to be a special case. In her lifetime, she ignited or influenced the genius of poets, painters, sculptors and other artists. Today, she transcends dance, and those who come to us for Duncan material are not dancers exclusively. To the contrary, contemporary artists and scholars representing all fields of artistic endeavor come to the Library to use our Duncan collection as if they also, today, view her as the liberator of all the arts. For this reason, interest in Duncan stands perhaps ten to one above any other dancer. However," says Miss Oswald, "our fabulous Denishawn collection, which Miss St. Denis and Ted Shawn so graciously gave to us, is used constantly, particularly by dancers."

SUMMATION

The majority of our witnesses have held that both Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis were essential to the birth of American dance. Few of the witnesses employ actual movements originated by the two and then, only in adapted or evolved ways. The influences of both, though very real, are general rather than detailed; are less concerned with technique than with principles. The consensus is that Isadora bequeathed her great spirit, her lyricism and her passion for great music as a dance incentive to those who followed while Miss St. Denis bequeathed a spirituality, a theatricalism and a formal concept of danced drama to her successors.

Death and time have lent a very special aura to Isadora, just as they have to Pavlova and Nijinsky, and our artists of today can satisfy their curiosity about her only through the study of writings and of memorabilia. In a sense it is easier to achieve a perspective on Isadora now that a retrospective approach is all that remains. We can still see St. Denis perform and even see the very dances that made her a rival of, or complement to, Isadora. But these works are no longer in themselves revolutionary, and although we may respond to the power of the dancer it is not easy to look at the dances in the light in which they appeared to audiences of fifty years ago. The younger generation can imagine Isadora but it can see St. Denis, and imaginings are more exciting than facts.

We must, therefore, strive for a special objectivity in sorting out the influences of these two great women. Both, admittedly, were rebels, and rebels are fascinating creatures but they are of value only if their rebellion leads somewhere, only if they are "for" something and not merely "against" something. Both Duncan and St. Denis were rebels with a cause. They fought the ballet because they did not believe in a system of movement circumscribed by convention and they fought against the popular theatrical dance of the day because they believed dance had something deeper to say than what was being said. But in their aesthetic fight they had replacements for what they wished removed.

Duncan replaced a system of movement with a concept of movement. She avoided the teaching of technique in the academic sense.

She knew that the body needs to be trained, disciplined and tuned but she felt that this should be done through natural movements. In the building of an artist, she did not want a system to prevail. She wanted no imitators but expected that each dancer would move in his own way in a personal response to stimuli of various sorts. Modern dancers of today follow in the footsteps of Isadora not in the technical sense (for modern dance has evolved its own gymnastic, its own technical disciplines) but, creatively, in an understanding that every movement they make is an overt manifestation of inner responses.

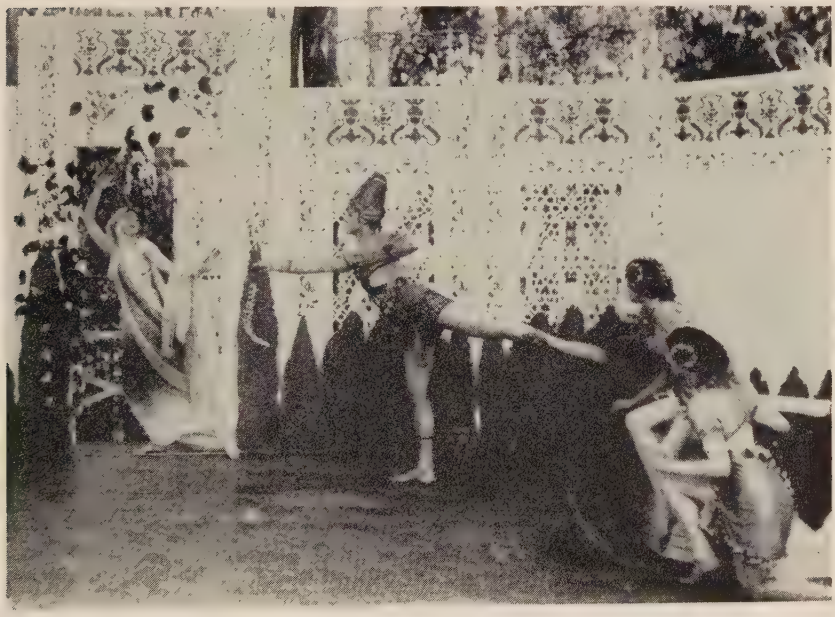
St. Denis, because of the ritualistic nature of her dances, dealt more with form than did Isadora and she avoided the narrowness of a system of dance by opening up her arms to all systems. The "all-inclusive" dance which she and Shawn used as a base for Denishawn promised the dancer freedom in eclecticism. The dancers of today, if they mirror Isadora's freedom of the person, also reflect this Denishawn freedom of form as they color modern dance works with ethnic aspects or give racial or period settings to those of their pieces which possess a dramatic base.

In rebelling against the shallowness of the dance of their day, they were affirmative in stating what should be danced. Isadora, though she professed to be an athiest, spoke often of the "divine," the divine in man himself. And she was concerned with projecting the noblest attributes of man through dancing. Music, of course, great music, was generally her stimulus. Our contemporary dancers demand the best in music and they too deal with the heart-deep attributes of man, perhaps on a wider scale than Isadora but, none the less, with Isadora's love of humanity. St. Denis, deeply religious, wished to dance of God and the need of man for spiritual flight. She has said herself that she should have cast these ideas in terms of Christianity at the start of her career, rather than letting them find their form in Oriental trappings, but she has lived to see expressions of faith inspire major dance works by Graham, Limón, Pearl Lang and many others.

Both Duncan and St. Denis were romanticists. Isadora danced romantically of man and his ideals; St. Denis of man and his spiritual aspirations. Isadora's dance told of the lust for life; Miss Ruth's, of the dangers of lust. Both were lovers of beauty. And a strange irony is that both probably would have been in agreement on the status of America's modern dance of today. It is likely that Isadora would

have disapproved of what would seem to her a harshness of technique, and it is no secret that Miss Ruth has difficulty in accepting certain of the themes, certain of the movements which characterize modern dance. Yet they made this dance possible—Isadora through her belief that each individual must speak in his own way in movement; Miss Ruth, through her belief that dance must be all-inclusive.

If Isadora and Miss Ruth are truly the founders of American dance, why have their styles, themes and even statements been altered so radically by contemporary dancers? First, we must admit that change—especially change with respect to progress—is both inevitable and essential. I think it not unfair to say that both Duncan and St. Denis were guided primarily by instinct, by the peculiar instinct of the genius. This is not to say that they neglected research or that they failed to analyze the body and the being with respect to movement. Isadora's basic exploration was, of course, concerned with the solar plexus as "the crater of motor power," but related investigations also carried her to the discovery that the rhythms of



Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn and members of their company in *The Garden of Kama,* 1915. Photograph by Putnam and Valentine, Los Angeles (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)

Drawing by José Clará (*Isadora Duncan,* Paris, 1928)

dance are born of the pull of gravity and the body's response to it, that dancing should spring from an inner emotion and that one movement should give birth to another movement in sequential action. A parallel to Duncan's sequential action was St. Denis' exploitation of successions (evolving, perhaps, from Delsarte sources) as manifested in the arm ripples in *The Incense* and even in full body phrases. St. Denis also appears to have been the first to use breath rhythms in conjunction with metric beats and to recognize that costumes and draperies and their manipulations should not be merely decorative but should extend the actions of the body into space. Space and the dancer's relationship to it interested her and, early in her career, she actually had a structure built which defined various planes, angles and direc-

tions in space. "But typical of me," she reports, "I soon lost interest in my contraption—it was much too confining—and I decided to let instinct guide me." But the successors of Duncan and St. Denis have been even more searching and scientific in their exploration, exploitation, extension and refinement of movement possibilities.

Times, as well as persons, have changed since the pioneers first established their creeds and styles long before World War I. It was, comparatively speaking, a peaceful world. The great political revolutions of the late eighteenth century and their immensely important echoes in the 1840's had already made their impacts and, for many parts of the world, had ushered in the age of democracy. It was, indeed, a time of serenity and confidence, particularly for America, and there was every reason to invite attention to beauty, to spirituality in an era dedicated to physical growth. The descendants, sandwiched between two great wars or creating through the second and its uneasy aftermath, belonged to an age of political and emotional anxiety; thus, they and their works are the fruits, sometimes bitter, of another era.

It is in just such a light that we should look at the great German dancer Mary Wigman. How strong have her influences been on American dance? Any great artist, of course, exerts influences and just as Isadora inspired Fokine in many ways, so has Wigman provided stimulation to fellow dancers outside her homeland. But modern dance developed concurrently in Central Europe and in America, and the Wigman approach to choreography mirrored her own time and the conditions and emotions existing in her own land. Germany had been crushed in World War I; America, though it suffered, was geographically untouched and was, furthermore, victorious. As we know, Hanya Holm found it necessary and right, when she established herself in America, to adapt Wigman methods to a totally different climate of thought, behavior and needs. Mary Wigman, then, although she must certainly be regarded as an artist of world-wide significance, cannot be accepted as a progenitor of American dance.

But did the expatriate Duncan and the exotic St. Denis actually speak for America and point the way for the American dance of the future?

We know that Isadora turned to Greece, that St. Denis turned to the Orient. Were they, then, truly American dancers? In a speech given from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, and quoted

in *My Life,* Isadora said, "And this dancing that has been called 'Greek.' It has sprung from America, it is the dance of America of the future. All these movements—where have they come from? They have sprung from the great Nature of America, from the Sierra Nevada, from the Pacific Ocean as it washes the coast of California; from the great spaces of the Rocky Mountains—from the Yosemite Valley—from the Niagara Falls." And, in her autobiography, St. Denis, inspired by the ancient East, wrote, "The Eastern tradition of teaching and culture maintains that by the reverence and acceptance of the old forms one draws into himself the very language and material out of which to fashion one's individual offering. We must not fear that by knowledge and a true culture of mind and body our individuality can be smothered . . . As a young nation, we still need to drink of old fountains."

Whatever their sources of insipration, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis were American not only by birth but in the purpose of their dance expressions. Havelock Ellis in his *The Dance of Life,* although he specifies their different sources of stimulation, refers to them both as Americans and as co-equal innovators, or restorers, of a dance free of ballet restrictions. Some writers, depending upon their lines of interest and paths of inquiry, give one of the two an edge over the other. For example, in Curt Sachs' monumental *World History of the Dance,* the only contemporary dance name mentioned is that of Isadora Duncan. In India, books written in Sanskrit extol the genius of St. Denis. In Germany, German-language books on both Isadora and Miss Ruth are still easily come by in book stalls.

Is it, then, possible to say that one of these two American dance geniuses is more important than the other? As Helen Tamiris has pointed out, the Romantic age of ballet was led by the "Christian" Taglioni and the "pagan" Elssler. A hundred years before them, a ballet revolution was headed by Camargo, inventor of steps, shaper of fashion, irresistible performer and by Sallé, choreographer-dancer, who brought dramatic action to ballet. And other eras in dance have their contrasting but equally valued and needed figures.

For our age of American dance, the decision is just as clear. Using again the words of Martha Graham, we have, in Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, "a double matriarch." Could we ask for a richer heritage, a greater dance blessing?

Drawing by José Clará (*Isadora Duncan,* Paris, 1928)

Ruth St. Denis in *Kwannon,* 1922. Photograph by E. O. Hoppé, London (Dance Collection, New York Public Library)